Time to Stand Down: Justification for the Decommissioning of USMC Reserve F/A-18 Squadrons

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Time to Stand Down:
Justification for the Decommissioning of USMC Reserve F/A-18 Squadrons

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Submitted by Capt E.S. Jakubowski
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Maj T.K. Hobbs, CG 13
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INTRODUCTION

In an uncertain world, the Marine Corps must learn to stretch every dollar available to maximize its war fighting capability. Escalating operation and maintenance costs, budgetary constraints, and increased deployment tempos all emphasize this point. Unfortunately, by continuing to cling to the excess infrastructure of reserve F/A-18 Hornet squadrons, the Marine Corps is spreading its resources too thin and risking not sufficiently equipping its active duty forces with the tools required to succeed in combat. Although maintaining reserve squadrons may have been justified in the past, the elimination of the four remaining reserve F/A-18 squadrons would greatly benefit the Marine Corps. These improvements include decreased operational costs, better personnel management, and increased aircraft availability.

THE CREATION OF THE RESERVE AVIATION PROGRAM

As the threat of war escalated in the early 1940's, the United States realized it did not possess enough aviators to mount a sustainable fighting force. Therefore, between March 1942 and May 1943, the 4th Marine Base Defense Aircraft Wing, now called the 4th Marine Aircraft Wing (the Marine Corps' reserve aviation component), was created along with many individual reserve squadrons, including the four remaining today: VMFA-112, VMFA-134, VMFA-142, and VMFA-321.[i] Each of these units

participated in extensive combat actions in the south Pacific, from Guadalcanal to Iwo Jima, Peleliu to Tokyo. As World War II came to a close however, the nation no longer required such a massive fighter aircraft capability; therefore most units, including each one listed above, was decommissioned.

Realizing the possible need to mobilize the disbanded units for a future conflict, the Marine Corps established a Marine Air Reserve Training Command in February 1946. Its tasking was to preserve the flying abilities of the Marine aviators leaving active service to return to civilian life.[ii] Through this program the Marine Corps maintained the skills of thousands of former military aircrew. Therefore when the Korean War broke out in 1950, this force of citizen soldiers could quickly mobilize. Three squadrons were deployed within two weeks and four more soon followed. Within months the reserves comprised over fifty percent of the officers of the First Marine Aircraft Wing and greatly contributed to the unit's combat success.

Today the reserve forces continue to be extremely valuable tools. In fact, the United States' commitments in both Afghanistan and Iraq have necessitated the mobilization of every reserve helicopter squadron in the Marine Corps. Because the mission of the Marine Forces Reserve is to "augment and reinforce active Marine forces in time of war, national emergency or contingency operations, provide personnel and

operational tempo relief for the active forces in peacetime, and provide service to the community,"[iii] thousands of reserve troops are continuously activated for the ongoing war on terrorism. Without the reserves, the Marine Corps would be unable to meet its commitments to the United States' national defense.

THE CASE FOR DEACTIVATION

Although clear justification for the reserve forces in general exists, the Marine Corps' reserve fighter squadrons have been tremendously under utilized for over fifty years. In fact, the remaining reserve F/A-18 squadrons have not been activated as a whole since before the Korean War.[iv] An internal Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing report states, "Historically, 4th MAW fighter assets have not been utilized in actual combat operations or unit rotations, even in time of great need."[v] These critical periods have included four of the largest military mobilizations of the last half-century – Korea, Vietnam, Operation Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. These facts alone question the relevance of maintaining a force that apparently will never be called into action.

DISADVANTAGES OF DECOMMISSIONING

Arguments to keep the reserve forces, however, cite the advantages they offer. Chiefly, the retention of highly skilled pilots averaging nearly three times the flight time, six times the combat experience, and at least twice the advanced

qualifications of a typical active-duty pilot remains a vital concern.[vi] The nation simply cannot afford to lose the corporate knowledge or combat flight experience of these pilots. Another reason to preserve the reserve fighters is to preserve the fighting force necessary to prosecute two simultaneous conflicts, in accordance with current defense department strategy. Active-duty squadrons alone cannot provide the assets, personnel, or war fighting capabilities for such a situation.

Several other arguments are often cited when trying to justify continuation of the reserve squadrons. First, the average cost of operating a reserve F/A-18A aircraft is nearly $1,100 cheaper per flight hour than an active-duty aircraft.[vii] Moreover, with base locations throughout the country, the reserve forces serve as the Marine Corps' ambassadors to the nation, providing vital exposure for the service in areas where there would otherwise be no presence. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, military bases provide enormous economic benefits to the communities that surround them. As such, politicians traditionally fight very hard to keep those facilities within their districts.

ADVANTAGES OF DECOMMISSIONING

Although maintaining the status quo might seem compelling, other issues regarding reserve units must be considered. The

Marine Corps could save over $45.7 million annually in flight related costs alone for each reserve squadron decommissioned.[viii] Additionally, reserve squadrons operate more cost-efficiently than their active duty counterparts because of reduced manning levels and deployment costs. When a squadron actually activates, the costs of temporary additional duty (TAD) payments for personnel, transportation of parts and supplies, and office support equipment would increase the operational costs nearly twelve percent.[ix]

More important than the monetary savings would be the gains realized through reallocation of personnel. A common practice within Marine Aircraft Groups in recent years has been to transfer personnel from one squadron returning from a deployment to another squadron just in time for it to reach required personnel levels prior to its deployment. Predictably, this action places numerous strains upon the affected Marines and their families. By eliminating the reserve squadrons, active duty personnel (which ensure the unit continues to function between reserve drill periods) could be returned to active duty squadrons, thus eliminating the personnel shortfalls. Additionally, because Congress requires reserve troop strength to remain constant, transferring displaced reserve personnel to other reserve units would create similar improvements. Moreover, the reserve pilots could fill much needed instructor

spots teaching new F/A-18 Hornet pilots at any of the nation's three fleet replenishment squadrons. This would allow active duty pilots who currently fill instructor billets to return to the active duty forces, thus further reducing the current personnel shortfalls. This arrangement would also directly profit the Marine Corps, as the highly skilled reserve officers could pass their skills along to the next generation of aviators.

In addition to the benefits of shifting manpower assets, the reallocation of reserve aircraft to the active duty forces would also prove advantageous. A recent memorandum of agreement (MOA) between the Navy and Marine Corps requires the Marines to allocate four F/A-18 squadrons (in addition to four previously integrated) to participate in Carrier Air Wing rotations by 2008, and another two squadrons shortly thereafter.[x] By utilizing reserve aircraft the Marine Corps can fulfill its commitments to the Navy while preserving its current force concept of twelve aircraft per squadron, instead of decreasing each squadron to ten aircraft as outlined in the MOA.[xi] This reduction is planned in part because of the limited availability and suitability of active duty aircraft. Finally, the transfer of reserve assets to the active duty forces would increase efficiency rates and reduce repair times because the planes

would be flown every day and supported by the robust repair facilities located at each active duty base.[xii]

The final justification for deactivation comes from policy and research completed within the service itself. First, a recent tactical aircraft integration agreement between the services states that both the Navy and the Marine Corps have agreed to each decommission a reserve squadron during fiscal year 2004.[xiii] Additional documentation compiled at the Pentagon lists numerous reasons for the decommissioning of each of the four reserve squadrons, with justification ranging from the geographic isolation of VMFA-112 in Ft Worth, TX, to the lack of available training ranges for VMFA-142 and VMFA-321, based at Atlanta, GA and Andrews AFB, MD, respectively.[xiv] Finally, the 4th MAW Tiger Team report stresses the importance of fiscal efficiency, and the need to maximize operating and training programs while centrally locating infrastructure near training ranges and support equipment.[xv] This could best be accomplished by eliminating the reserve squadrons and reallocating their assets throughout the fleet.

CONCLUSION

In the current environment of increased budgetary restraints and having to do more with less, it is critical that the Marine Corps maximizes its limited assets. To this end, the Marine Corps' reserve F/A-18 squadrons no longer represent the

best use of those precious resources. By not activating them during any of the major conflicts of the past fifty years, the Marine Corps has demonstrated that the squadrons are no longer relevant. This point is further emphasized through the current agreement for the Navy and Marine Corps to each decommission one of their reserve squadrons during fiscal year 2004. Additionally, the active duty forces will benefit greatly from the reallocation of resources, both in terms of manpower and aircraft, into their force structure. All of these points clearly articulate the need for the Marine Corps to eliminate its reserve F/A-18 squadrons.

Notes

[i] John Pike, *Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing [4th MAW]*, 20 February 2003, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/usmc/4maw.htm> (8 January 2004)

[ii] Pike, (8 January 2004)

[iii] Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing, *4th MAW Hornet Tiger Team Report*, 2003 (New Orleans, LA: 2003), 2.

[iv] Fax received 23 December 2003, from the U.S. Marine Corps History and Museums Division, Marine Corps Historical Center, *Lineage of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 112 [134, 142, and 321]*, (Washington Navy Yard, D.C.: 2003)

[v] Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing, 31.

[vi] Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing, 13.

[vii] GS13 Claude Gardiner, "F/A-18 Costs FY-04 OP-20 Funding," 12 January 2004, personal email (12 January 2004)

[viii] Figure compiled from tabulated data within the Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing report, page 22.

[ix] Gardiner, 12 January 2004.

[x] Deputy chief of Naval Operations and Deputy Commandant for Aviation United States Marine Corps*, Department of the Navy Tactical Aircraft Integration Memorandum of Agreement*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: 20 August 2002),3.

[xi] Deputy Chief of Naval Operations and Deputy Commandant for Aviation United States Marine Corps, 2.

[xii] Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing, 15.

[xiii] Deputy Chief of Naval Operations and Deputy Commandant for Aviation United States Marine Corps, 2.

[xiv] Col Robert S. Walsh, *MROC Executive Summary 23 December 2003,* (Washington, D.C.: 2003), 1-2.

[xv] Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing, 51.

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